

## 'THE ATLANTIS OF DALE HOLLOW LAKE': DOCUMENTARY REVEALS

### WATERY REMAINS OF CITY UNDER A LAKE

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Sunday, Mar 08, 2009

**UPPER CUMBERLAND** — In warmer months of the year, many who pass through these parts of Tennessee make it a point to stop at Dale Hollow Lake to enjoy its crystal clear waters by boating, water skiing, swimming or fishing. Stand in the lake and look down, and you will probably be able to see your feet at the bottom. Go out to deeper waters, and you might be able to see the old foundation of Old Willow Grove School.



*(Pictured: The foundation of Old Willow Grove School can still be seen though the water of Dale Hollow Lake. But don't be fooled the foundation, approximately 15 feet tall at its highest point, may appear close to the surface, but it's partly because Dale Hollow Lake is said to have some of the clearest water in the southeastern U. S. Photo courtesy of Darren Shell).*

The story goes that, in 1942, residents of the small town of Willow Grove were approached by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, who told them that they wanted to build a dam on their property. The residents were paid for their land, packed up and moved, some up to higher elevations and others much farther away. The Army Corps tore down remaining homes and buildings to flood the area into what is now Dale Hollow Lake, but lasting memories of the town still remain underwater. Dale Hollow Lake historian Darren Shell, certified scuba diver Randall Slayton and Marcus Mitchell were fascinated with the city under the water, so fascinated that they worked together to produce a DVD documentary, "Journey to Old Willow Grove: The Atlantis of Dale Hollow Lake," complete with underwater footage of all that remains of Old Willow Grove School. "I've been a historian for Dale Hollow for years and have written several books about the lake. Most are all historical and have to do with the lake's making and about the old towns now beneath the waves," said Darren Shell, "The Dale Hollow Lake Gravedigger" storyteller and tour guide as well as the film's narrator. "After these books were finished and since I had so much information compiled about the lake, my mind drifted to perhaps making a documentary about it, also. I had done a few projects with Marcus Mitchell of Roundtoit Recordings, and after a short synopsis of what the show might be about, Marcus was quickly onboard. Once Randall Slayton got involved in the underwater footage, he was excited, too. "I'd known Randall for years from his work with the Sheriff's Department in Celina. We've been good friends. Much of what he's found underwater has stemmed from reading my books. Once he took one of



*(Pictured: Old Willow School in its heyday, when it was still above water. Photo courtesy of Darren Shell)*

the Gravedigger Tours in the campground at Willow Grove, he was hooked on the history of the area and soon became inspired to help with this new documentary.” Slayton did research on the old layout of the town and took high-tech underwater filming equipment with him on his multiple dives to show others his discoveries. “(Randall’s) underwater filming work was fascinating. I learned right away that there was much more to underwater filming than meets the eye!” said Shell. “His gear takes up most of the room on the large pontoon we used in the process. From start to finish, it took us better than six months. I had no idea what all was involved in making this sort of show, but I got the education firsthand!” Shell is a recognizable face because of his work with the Gravedigger Tours. “I get a lot of questions about the Gravedigger Tours and about how it all ties in with this show and the history of the lake. Although I was not born in Tennessee, I’ve grown up on the lake and have lived here most of my life. Everyone who knows me, knows I’m all about Dale Hollow,” he said. “It’s my favorite place in the world. That’s why I decided to create the Gravedigger Tours in the park. It’s allowed me to teach the rich history of the lake through the fictional eyes of an old gravedigger from back when the lake was made. I started first of all by storytelling at the grade schools in the area. Kids love the stories about the gravedigging that occurred when the lake was made. And I soon found out that the adults did, too! “After seeing the responses from the schools, I just had to start the tours of the park. Some fascinating things have happened in and around the park, and we’ve taken bunches of great creepy photos while on tour up there. It’s fun and inexpensive! In the fall, I do several shows each weekend and charge \$5 per person (kids are free). In the summer, I occasionally do one on weeknights and admission is free. I can’t



usually give much notice for those, but I still try to do them often enough that those who want to see it can get the chance. I give several by appointment the rest of the year for parties or get-togethers. It really is a fun tour, and it lasts for about two hours, all on the paved roads within the park. This will be my fourth season giving the tours. All the information I give is historical fact and some of it is down right creepy!”

Shell used his insight of the area and wrote the book “The History of Dale Hollow Lake.” Among the stories in the book is the one that

drives most of the searches under the water: locating the final resting place of Eddie Irons and his walnut casket.

*(Pictured: A photo of Eddie Irons’ walnut casket after one of its accidental “excavations,” looked over by an unidentified male. Photo courtesy of Darren Shell)*

According to Shell, Eddie Irons, member of one of the area’s founding families, was a young, spirited gentleman who, for his 18th birthday, was gifted by his parents a horse just as stubborn and vibrant as he. Not afraid of the horse’s willful nature, Irons jumped on its back and kicked its sides. Two attempts did nothing to move the horse, but the third and final kick was enough to get it riled up to spring into a gallop. Irons held on for dear life as the horse steered into a thicket of walnut trees. Eddie Irons’ father Edward watched as his son was ridden into a low-lying tree branch, breaking his neck and killing him instantly. Edward Irons chopped down the walnut tree and made a casket for his son, and buried him up on a knoll. Years later, when digging the land to build a school, workers found that walnut casket with Eddie Irons’ remains. Choosing to keep him where he was, they dug deeper, reburied him and built the school over his grave. This happened once more, and the results were the same. The third time, contractors decided to make Irons’ final resting place a little more, well, restful. While pouring the concrete to the Old Willow Grove School steps and porch, they placed the walnut casket in a hollow space and filled it with concrete. After the town was cleared, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers tore down the Old Willow School and blasted the concrete steps with dynamite. The school’s foundation and what is left of the concrete are still on the bottom of Dale Hollow Lake.

“We still continue to dive for other sites around the lake, even now that the show is completed. It doesn’t

look like we will find anything left of the old filling station, but there are numerous other things we hope to find. I know Lillydale once had a huge bridge that crossed the lake. Its giant pillars are still standing in piles of rubble,” Shell said. “We are anxious to see what’s down there. There are a couple of underwater caves that might be found as well. We’d have our work cut out for us there! Randall still likes that schoolhouse dive, though. It’s well marked and not difficult to find. Even those unfamiliar with the lake can find it without difficulty.”

Those interested in viewing “Journey to Old Willow Grove,” complete with underwater shots and interviews by former Old Willow Grove residents, can purchase a copy for \$25 at Dale Hollow Lake and around the Upper Cumberland.

“Right now, we are selling the DVDs where I sell my books, which are several locations around the lake,” Shell said. “Aside from selling them at Willow Grove Marina, I have them in Celina at the Dale Hollow 1 Stop and in Livingston at The Antique Market on the square. In Byrdstown, Sunset Marina and Against the Flow both carry them. I don’t have a location in Cookeville yet, but I’m looking. If readers want copies of my books or this DVD, I can ship them out right from the marina. The contact number is (931) 823-6616. My Web site is [www.DaleHollowGravedigger.com](http://www.DaleHollowGravedigger.com). Folks can see what my books are about on the site, and read quite a bit of interesting lake history just by logging on.” *Dale Hollow Lake, Celina, Clay Co., TN.*



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